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ABSTRACT

A review of recent literature on the whole language approach to second language teaching focuses on the value of the approach for English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) learning. It examines research and theory dating back to 1977 on various aspects of the first- and second-language learning environment and process in children. Based on this review, it is concluded that all elements that support and reinforce second language learning are reflected in the whole language classroom in which learners are constantly talking and negotiating with both peers and adults, learning as they engage in authentic social interaction through context-rich language activities. Contains 34 references. (MSE)

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Whole Language and ESL Children

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Whole Language and ESL Children

Issues regarding language acquisition and development in second language acquisition and first language learning are complex and uncertain. Recently, researchers and theorists (Freeman and Freeman, 1992; Goodman K., 1986; Goodman Y., 1980; Hudelson, 1984, 1989a, 1989b; Krashen, 1985a, 1985b, 1991; Moll, 1989; Moore, 1990; Rigg, 1991; Rupp, 1986) have clearly demonstrated some of the issues involved in enhancing language growth of children who speak English as their second language (ESL children) under the whole language approach.

Goodman Y. (1980) explains language development as the following:

> Language development is natural whether written or oral. It develops in a social setting because of the human need to communicate and interact with significant others in the culture. It develops in response to the creative, active participation of the individual trying to understand and make sense out of the world in which he or she is growing (p.4).

Rigg and Enright (1986) claim that children who are developing English are not "language disabled" or "limited" in any way. Rather, they bring to school a rich heritage of cultural and linguistic background (p.1). They believe that ESL children are benefited most when the holistic nature of language is recognized and taught as a whole.

After years of study, Cummins (1981) found that most second language learners develop sufficient BICS skills within two to three years, but they require from five to seven years to acquire CALP . A study conducted by Collier (1989) has reinforced Cummins's

findings. Even second language students with strong academic backgrounds in their first language took from four to eight years to acquire the language necessary to score well on standardized tests in schools. Based on this point, it is not difficult to find out why dropouts and school failures are frequently reported among second language learners. They have already experienced frustration in school before they develop the academic language to succeed academically.

The concern over second language learners' educational failure is clear and urgent since the numbers of these students coming to school from varied cultural backgrounds and using languages other than English have increased dramatically in the last decade (Johnson & Roen, 1989; Hudelson, 1984; Rupp, 1986). Olsen (1991) reports that 5 percent of all students k-12 in the United States were classified as Limited or Non-English Proficient (LEP or NEP) during the 1989-1990 school year. In some states, the numbers of language minority students are even higher. The second language learner is no longer a rarity. To improve and extend language minority students' potential to succeed educationally, Freeman and Freeman (1992) point out that whole language is the answer.

Freeman and Freeman (1992) believe that whole language is an appropriate approach to extend the learning potential of the second language learners. In whole language classrooms, learning takes place from whole to part; learning is child-centered, meaningful, and is a social activity; both oral and written language are acquired simultaneously; learning takes place in the first

language; and the learner's confidence is essential to expand his/her learning potential.

Rice (1989) points out that social aspects are important in language learning. Language development does not occur in a vacuum; other people play an important role. After reviewing current issues in child language acquisition, Rice suggests that the role of the teacher in language facilitation is to socially interact with children in a conversational manner about objects and events which focus on their needs and interests. Teachers should speak to children at their comprehension levels; plenty of communication opportunities should be provided in the context of meaningful activities.

Cummins also emphasizes the importance of context in developing language proficiency. According to Cummins (1981), language that is context-embedded is less cognitively demanding than language that is context-reduced. Cummins distinguishes context-embedded communication as typical of face-to-face interactions where the communication is supported by an appropriate situation; on the other hand, context-reduced communication involves situations where there are very few contexture aids in interpreting the communication. Second language teachers know that one way to embed language in context is to provide authentic learning experience for their students. They believe that the more contextual support through the use of materials and actions in the classroom, the less students have to rely solely on their new language.

Rigg (1991) maintains that language use is always in a social context, and this applies to both oral and written language as well as first and second language use. Other second language educators also believe that working with others in a social activity is a crucial element in acquiring a language (Hudelson, 1989a; Rigg & Allen, 1989; Rigg & Hudelson, 1986).

According to Rupp (1986), there are parallels between the whole language approach and the teaching of English as a second language (ESL), where the four aspects of language arts are taught and integrated as a whole. In Rupp's view, both in whole language and ESL classrooms, teachers play important roles to facilitate and model language learning, and create a positive and risk-free environment where children are encouraged and invited to contribute their unique cultural backgrounds and personal experiences to participate actively in the learning process. Rupp (1986) indicates that, in second language acquisition, both Krashen and Terrell (1983) have focused on the same thing as whole language advocates do which is on comprehension and acquiring language within a context (p. 5). Rupp acknowledges the similarities between whole language and ESL which include the fact that both look at language learning as developmental, both start where the children are, and children in both ESL and whole language classrooms are active participants in their learning.

Heald-Taylor (1986) indicates that the whole language approach is based on current research in language acquisition (Krashen, 1977; Holdaway, 1979; Goodman Y., 1980; Terrell, 1985). Based on her view of how children learn and acquire language,

Heald-Taylor (1986) believes that the whole language approach benefits the ESL learners because: 1) youngsters can be involved in all language activities regardless of their degree of proficiency in English language; 2) learning strategies are child-centered, helping youngsters to continuously experience and use language to think; 3) development in reading, writing, speaking, and listening are integrated and grow simultaneously; 4) students acquire the target language by being engaged in the learning process; and 5) the whole language approach facilitates growth in both first and second languages. Heald-Taylor indicates specific whole language learning strategies to help ESL students learn English. The key strategies include dictation, literature, process writing, themes, and evaluations.

Likewise, Clark (1992) states that there are five reasons why whole language helps migrant children: 1) it enhances self-esteem of the learner; they see themselves as "doers" in the learning process; 2) it is effective with highly mobile students; worthwhile learning experiences link students' homes and school together; 3) it is successful with students whose primary language is other than English; 4) reluctant readers and writers experience success and growth in language skills; and 5) it is congruent with other language arts and content area curriculum (p. 4).

Milk (1985) also believes that effective ESL teaching provides situations for students in which they can interact meaningfully in the target language. Also, the focus should be on the communicative message rather than on the syntactical form. Likewise, Lamb (1990) reinforces that the whole language method of teaching language

acquisition is based on the "message" philosophy (p. 4). Lamb (1990), Hayward (1988), and Hillerich (1990) all believe that whole language is based on the premise that children acquire a language by using it, writing it, thinking it, and reading it. Lamb concludes that whole language and ESL instruction are based on the same basic principles that are meaning-based, oriented to natural situations, and based on the prior experiences of the students. Lamb (1990) argues that through the use of whole language techniques, an ESL teacher can incorporate holistic language situations into the ESL classroom and advance the student's acquisition of a second language. The whole language techniques illustrated by Lamb include spontaneous conversation, semantic mappings, dialogue journals, and writing folders. Lamb states that by including the whole language system in the ESL classroom, a teacher can teach all four language skills, thereby maximizing instructional time and exposing students to a larger amount of language in many different forms.

Similarly, Rigg (1991) argues that, since most traditional ESL programs offer the four language modes separately, whole language, using all four modes simultaneously in functional contexts, may provide ESL students opportunity to interact with the target language. Further, The California English Language Arts Framework (1987) indicates the need for a different curriculum for ESL students:

> One of the greatest challenges to English-language arts programs in California today is extending the crucial language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing to the increasing numbers of students in the schools for whom

> English is a second language. . . . Limited English-proficient students need a rich linguistic environment in which the use of repetitive skill-based worksheets and exercises is limited, and frequent opportunities are provided for students to speak, listen, read, and write in meaningful contexts (p. 22).

Whole Language and Second Language Learning

According to Rigg (1991), the history of whole language research with second language learners is similar to holistic research with first language learners. Y. Goodman (1980) may be the first person to investigate the print awareness of preschool preliterate children including both native English speakers and non- or limited English-speaking children. She found that even children who were virtually non-speakers of English could read English print in the environment. Likewise, Hudelson (1984), by using repeated interviews and observations to examine ESL children's reading development in English, found: 1) that even children with virtually little or no English read environmental print in English; 2) that ESL children can write English for various purposes early in their development of English; and 3) that the experiential and cultural background of ESL children has a strong influence on their reading comprehension. The findings of this study imply that, to produce proficient users of English, teachers should: 1) encourage ESL children to interact with the environment; 2) use their background knowledge and living environment for literacy experiences; 3) create meaningful contexts in which children can respond; and 4) recognize that mistakes are necessary and play an important role in children's development and acquisition of a second language.

Rupp (1986) reports that the whole language approach has been successfully incorporated into a number of ESL activities in an elementary school ESL program. These activities include: daily morning messages that serve as a vehicle for reacting, discussing, and participating in other group activities; squiggle writing, in which students are given written squiggles from which they develop a picture and story; and the use of resource materials for students to work on individual or group projects. Rupp found that students in these schools are making progress and have benefited from the different activities. He concluded that the whole language strategies have proven successful and are appropriate for different instructional situations.

Moore (1990) conducted a case study that details an immigrant boy's experience of learning English under the whole language approach. The teacher, after using an individualized discourse technique and autobiographical writing tasks to teach him English, found marked progress in the child's English knowledge. Moore's study reinforces the importance of using individualized, whole-language approaches when educating bilingual learners.

Flemming (1990) spent three weeks observing the teaching and learning of non-English background children in primary schools in New Zealand. From these observations, he suggests that the key factors influencing the development of literacy in LEP (Limited English Proficiency) children are teacher expectation of students' achievement in reading, a rich, whole language environment, and a nurturing classroom climate. This study implies that these principles are transferable to other schools in the United States.

The above studies reveal that all elements that support and reinforce second language learning are reflected in the whole language classrooms in which both second language learners and those who are learning English are constantly talking and negotiating with peers and adults. They learn as they engage in authentic social interaction within context-rich language activities.

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